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DATE: 02-Apr-2009

24 March 1973

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The Status of U. S. Prisoners in Laos

1. On 27 January 1973 the DRV and the PRG announced their lists of POWs to be released, containing 460 and 125 names, respectively. On 1 February the Pathet Lao announced their list of ten POWs to be returned -- one U. S. Navy, six U. S. Air Force, two U. S. civilians, and one Foreign National (a Canadian missionary captured in Savannakhet). This latter list purported to be a complete list of all U. S. POWs held by the Pathet Lao.

2. This Pathet Lao list was immediately suspect. It immediately generated speculation that there is -- i. e., must be -- a supplementary Pathet Lao list, for the following reasons:

(a) All ten persons named on the 1 February Pathet Lao list are known to be held in North Vietnam. Although not kept in the same cells, they have been held as a group, and were last reported, by returning U. S. POWs, to be in the Ha Lo Prison ("the Hanoi Hilton") in downtown Hanoi.

(b) There have been numerous intelligence reports over the past five years from Pathet Lao and NVA ralliers and POWs of sightings of American POWs held in Laos in the caves in the Sam Neua area. Most of these reports have been obtained by CIA.

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(c) There is no communications intelligence referring directly to POW camps in Laos. Nonetheless, over the years, COMINT (chiefly intercepted NVA messages) has indicated that there are U. S. POWs in Laos.

(d) Overflights and photography have showed active caves in the suspect areas, though none have ever been positively identified as holding prisoners.

(e) There are at least two cases where we have photographs, released by the Communists, of identifiable and identified Americans who are depicted as POWs captured in Laos. (One photo clearly shows the officer's name stitched over his fatigue pocket.) Neither is on any of the lists.

(f) The DRV and PRG lists both show those who have died in captivity, the Pathet Lao did not, and there are presumed deaths in the environment of Laos.

3. DIA has analyzed the number we thought should be prisoners in North Vietnam against the number the DRV has listed and found that 45% of our possibles turned up on the final list. A similar comparison in South Vietnam yields the figure of 21%. Since we carry 352 as possible in Laos, nine Americans on the Pathet Lao list gives a ridiculously low figure of 2.5%. DIA further feels that the environment of Laos is in some ways similar to North Vietnam (i. e., predominant air losses) and in some ways similar to South Vietnam (i. e., predominant ground losses). DIA therefore splits the difference and feels that a 30-35% return rate should be expected. DIA recognizes, of course, that this is at best an educated guess. Areas where U. S. planes went down in North Vietnam were, by and large, densely populated, hence pilots and aircrew who survived the crash would normally have been picked up. Much of Laos is sparsely populated and pilots or crew downed in sparsely populated areas (particularly heavily forested areas) might have died of various causes (e. g., untreated injuries or starvation) before they were spotted or captured.

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4. DIA has reason to believe that the Communists in Laos should have some information on at least 215 Americans downed in Laos. This is based on such known evidence (from time of downing) as a good chute, beeper on the ground, or voice communication which often ended with the man on the ground announcing that he was being captured. Many of these men could have been killed on the spot or died later, but the Communists should have information on what happened to them.



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